

Many refugees fleeing conflicts in the Middle East are now resettling in regional NSW, LACHLAN MURDOCH reports.

Armidale welcomes new arrivals



Armidale railway station opened in 1883. Grahamec wikipedia.org

The NSW regional town of Armidale has become a resettlement location for people from refugee backgrounds, with the first arrivals making their way directly from Northern Iraq to this town in February 2018.

By June 2019 more than 250 people have made their home in what is the first new regional settlement location in NSW to be established in more than a decade. The journey from Erbil in Northern Iraq to Armidale takes a few hope and expectation filled days, as family groups make their way from a refugee camp to take the first steps in establishing a new life in the New England region of NSW.

That Armidale became a centre for refugee

resettlement like Coffs Harbour and Wagga Wagga before is no accident. The decision to select Armidale was in large part a product of the efforts of members of the local Armidale community who highlighted the suitability of the town for refugee resettlement. This desire on the part of 'Armidalians' has combined with the stated commitment of the Commonwealth Government to resettle a greater proportion of the humanitarian intake in regional Australia and made resettlement a reality.

People arriving from refugee backgrounds are not new to Armidale. The town has a history of accepting refugees and migrants over many years. However, this is the first experience of refugee resettlement via a deliberate, planned effort on the part of Government to establish the town as a refugee resettlement location, and one that

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will likely see further arrivals in the coming years.

The process of resettlement has been supported by Commonwealth, State and Local governments who co-ordinated initial arrangements through a steering committee that met in Armidale. The strong commitment to resettlement at the local level was exemplified by the Armidale Regional Council voting on two separate occasions to declare the town a centre for newly arrived refugees.

It is now almost eighteen months on from the first arrivals to Armidale and resettlement has been successful thanks to the efforts of the new arrivals themselves, the co-ordination and resourcing from government, the co-operation from the various services involved and the high levels of support from the local

community. Indeed, a recently completed study undertaken by the University of New England into attitudes towards resettlement of newly arrived refugees in Armidale revealed an overall positive perception on the part of the Armidale community to the newly arrived refugees.

Many of those that have arrived in Armidale are members of the Yazidi community who have been heavily persecuted in Northern Iraq and Syria for their religious beliefs, and who have suffered very significant trauma in the context of that persecution. In response to high levels of trauma amongst this population and the need for trauma counselling and other support services, STARTTS established a new office in Armidale in July 2018 and employed a counsellor/project officer. Other STARTTS staff members within the rural and regional team with experience working with highly-traumatised clients have provided vital additional counselling support over the last 18 months through visits to Armidale made from Coffs Harbour and the Upper Hunter regions.

STARTTS has also worked closely with services in Armidale to offer support in schools through the School Liaison program and training to a range of health and adult education professionals and to others involved in the delivery of social services.

In more recent times STARTTS has expanded our services to include the delivery of Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) groups via training and capacity building of bi-cultural FICT facilitators from Yazidi background.

The resettlement of a new group of people who have experienced significant levels of trauma in a new location has not been without its challenges. In particular these are related to the lack of availability of interpreting services in the language of our clients, the challenges in learning a new language and the very real desire for family members to trace and be reunited with relatives who have been lost as a result of the persecution directed towards the Yazidi.

At the twelve month point of the settlement effort, the NSW Co-ordinator General for Refugee Resettlement, Professor Peter Shergold visited Armidale and reflected on the success of the work that so many have done and identified the Armidale experience as an example of what can be achieved through regional resettlement.

It is expected that STARTTS will further expand its services in Armidale to continue to meet what is anticipated to be greater demand for treatment as more people make Armidale their home in the coming months and years.®